

Inspirations from the Life and Work of  
Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg  
by Rabbi Judith Kummer  
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A moment of levity, with gratitude to Gary Klein, who sent in this joke:

The Pope met with his Cardinals to discuss a proposal from Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel.

"Your Holiness," said one of his Cardinals, "Mr. Netanyahu wants to challenge you to a game of golf to show the friendship shared by the Jewish and Catholic faiths."

The Pope thought this was a good idea, but he had never held a golf club in his hand. "Don't we have a Cardinal who could represent me?" he asked.

"None that plays very well," the Cardinal replied. "But there is a man named Jack Nicklaus, an American golfer who is a devout Catholic. We can offer to make him a Cardinal. Then ask him to play Mr. Netanyahu as your personal representative. In addition to showing our spirit of cooperation, we'll also win the match."

They agreed that this was a good idea. The call was made. Of course, Jack Nicklaus was honored, and he agreed to play.

The day of the match came — and went.

The day after the match, Nicklaus reported to the Vatican to inform the Pope of the result. "I have some good news for you, your Holiness," said Nicklaus, "and some bad news."

The Pope replied, "Tell me the good news first, Cardinal Nicklaus."

"Well, your Holiness, I don't like to brag," said Nicklaus, "but even though I've played some pretty terrific rounds of golf in my life, this was the best I have ever played, by far. I must have been inspired from above. My drives were long and true, my irons were accurate and purposeful, and my putting was perfect. With all due respect, my play was truly miraculous."

"There's bad news?" asked the Pope.

"Yes, I lost by three strokes to Rabbi Tiger Woods!"

We switch gears now, from speaking about these famous folks to speaking about another prominent person.

My friends,

Last week, on erev Rosh Hashanah, our nation lost a giant — a tiny woman in physical stature, but a gigantic presence in accomplishment and in the power to inspire. I am speaking of course of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

On this day of Yom Kippur, when we are thinking about some of the things that matter most in life and that *make a life matter*, I thought it might be good for us to look at a few of the important life lessons we can learn from the example of Justice Ginsburg's life and her work.

I want to talk with you today about ten of the things I found most inspiring about Justice Ginsburg, in no particular order.

**1. You can accomplish your dreams — if you stay motivated and work toward what you believe in.**

Justice Ginsburg was a true inspiration, and many called her a force to be reckoned with. In an era when there were very few women working in the field of law, she got herself into Harvard law school — a tremendous feat for anyone, and even more so at that time for her as a woman — and she went on to a celebrated career battling gender discrimination.

When the established law firms of the 1950's and '60s shut her out because she was a woman, Justice Ginsburg used that discrimination as motivation, and she argued a series of six cases before the U.S. Supreme Court that pushed for gender equality. Ultimately, she won five of those cases.

In her lifetime, Justice Ginsburg fought continually for equal rights for women — and also for men. She thought of feminism in its broadest form: allowing us all to *choose* the roles we take on in life and not be dictated by long-time gender roles and norms. It inspires me that she thought that none of us should be boxed into gender roles that might not fit us.

**2. Not only *can* one fight for what one believes in; it is *incumbent* upon each of us to take a stand, and to be part of the democratic process.**

Justice Ginsburg was not one to sit on the sidelines. In cases of discrimination, she took up the gauntlet and used whatever power she had — the power of her fine mind, the power of whatever professional position she was in, the power of her bully pulpit — to make the world a better and a more equal and a more just place.

She stands as a powerful object lesson for each of us — to follow our convictions and take action to organize with others and make the changes we see necessary in our world, and on a most basic level, to make sure we take our part in the democratic process and cast the sacred vote each of us is granted as a US citizen. I urge you, as she would have, to make sure you vote, because it's your sacred privilege.

### **3. and 4: About speaking — and about listening**

#### **3. Choose your words wisely**

Justice Ginsburg was known for her eloquence and for her persuasiveness — and also for her care in thinking about the impact of her words. She was known to pause and to think carefully about what she would say before the words would leave her mouth.

In this era of all-too-quick reactivity and divisiveness, she was more measured and careful in her speech, which allowed her words to be heard — even if she spoke them in a quiet voice — and which encouraged others to listen carefully for what she had to say.

In her book, “In My Own Words,” Justice Ginsburg stated, “Reacting in anger or annoyance will not advance one’s ability to persuade.” She knew the power of a calmly spoken phrase.

And some years ago, when asked about advice she might have for young women today, Justice Ginsburg replied, “Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”

Using one’s words carefully so as to be a connector and not a divider was an important guiding rule for her.

#### **And 4, about listening:**

While she was known for being careful to listen to both sides of an argument, both at work and at home, Justice Ginsburg was also known to have said as a supreme court justice, “It helps sometimes to *be a little deaf* — (in marriage and in) every workplace, including the good job I have now.”

This is one of the inspiring lessons for me, that it’s important to listen, but it’s also important not to dwell on some of the hurtful things that may come out of the mouths of our opponents. When we can choose not to hear — or not to focus on — some of those things, it may help us collectively move toward being a more gentle and caring and unified society.

#### **5. Life is about balance, with a good mix of the professional and also the personal.**

Justice Ginsburg made no bones about the importance of her family and her family life, alongside her professional life. She prioritized her family life from early on, even while engaged in the sometimes brutally-rigorous schedule of a law student. She recalled of those days, “I went to class at 8:30am, and I came home at 4pm; that was children’s hour. It was a total break in my day, and children’s hour lasted until Jane [her daughter] went to sleep. Then I was happy to go back to the books, so I felt each part of my life made me rested from the other.”

Balance is a truly admirable goal for each of us in life; we each need a good mix of work and “play,” of responsibility and pleasure, in order to sustain any effort for the long haul. Justice Ginsburg was a good role model for us in this regard.

#### **6. Don’t be afraid to draw on your Jewish heritage, whether religious or cultural — and**

**even if you find parts of your religion that you don't like, don't "chuck out the baby with the bathwater;" see what there is to mine in your heritage for the richness it can add to life.**

Justice Ginsburg came from an identified Jewish family. She grew up in Brooklyn and her family belonged to the East Midwood Jewish Center, a Conservative congregation.

She encountered a dismaying sexism in traditional Jewish practice when she lost her mother as a teen and found out that as a girl, she would not be able to say kaddish; she didn't count to make up a minyan.

She also grew up in an era when she encountered signs that read "No dogs or Jews allowed."

In spite of these negative aspects associated with her religion, Justice Ginsburg was proud to be a Jew and to be active in Jewish organizations.

Her Jewish heritage provided her with what Dahlia Lithwick of Slate magazine termed the "fundamentally Jewish sensibilities" of a "dedication to text, a Talmud-like devotion to detail, a deep conviction in the power of dissent.... [and] a deep concern for the other, the outsider, the weak and the vulnerable." Justice Ginsburg's efforts to champion just causes and lend her power to those who are disempowered in our society were rooted deeply in her Jewish heritage.

She was known to have had the Biblical phrase "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* — Justice, justice shall you pursue" framed in her office, and she had the word *tzedek* ( justice) woven into one of the famous lace collars that she wore as a supreme court justice.

## **7. Belief in the power of the dissenting opinion and in incremental change**

Justice Ginsburg knew the importance of a well-crafted dissenting opinion. In Jewish law, we have a long tradition of preserving the minority opinion in legal decisions, with the thought that it lends a vital elasticity to the system: should circumstances change, the careful process of consideration would already have taken place and been recorded, and a new law reflecting the dissent might be enacted to meet the new situation.

Any one who has studied even the briefest Talmudic passage is familiar with statements that "Rabbi Hillel said this" and "Rabbi Shammai taught that" — and the halacha almost always went with R. Hillel's teachings. (Poor Rabbi Shammai!) It was important, though, that Rabbi Shammai's opinion was retained as part of the legal record, because dissenting opinions carried great weight.

Justice Ginsburg was the author of many dissents during her years on the bench, and when she dissented, she often inspired legislative change.

One of the most famous was the Lilly Ledbetter case, where Justice Ginsburg's dissent led to congress passing the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, establishing that women should be paid on a par with men.

Justice Ginsburg became famous for her statement “I dissent.” She didn’t say “I respectfully dissent,” but “I dissent.” She didn’t kowtow to anyone, but stood firm in her own authority.

And she believed that her dissents were important because what she was writing about was significant, not just for today but also for tomorrow, and hopefully it would have an effect on the future.

In her powerful prose, Justice Ginsburg wrote “Dissents speak to a future age... The greatest dissents do become court opinions, and gradually over time their views become the dominant view. So that’s the dissenter’s hope: that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow.”

And about **incremental change**:

As Jane Eisner, editor of the Forward, described, Justice Ginsburg was not a firebrand; “she pursued a long-term strategy to chip away at discriminatory laws, one by one... She tried to work through the system...[and] believed in institutions and incremental change.”

It seems to me that we don’t get as much mileage from sudden, dramatic shifts. Instead, this kind of slower, more methodical evolution can lead to more stable and longer-lasting change.

**8. We all know from kindergarten on that it’s really good to make friends with others. And Justice Ginsburg was one of whom it could be said, “she plays well with others.”**

Justice Ginsburg had a deep and abiding friendship with Justice Antonin Scalia, who was known to hold political views diametrically opposed to hers; where Justice Ginsburg was known for her liberal democratic values, Justice Scalia came from a Conservative background and approach. But despite their deep political differences, the two not only got along well, they socialized together, enjoyed the opera together and even traveled together.

It sounds like there was a richness to their interaction that both of them valued perhaps not *despite* their differences but *because* of them. And indeed, for any of us who have engaged in dialogue across any lines of difference, we can speak about the strong connections that can grow specifically because of the bridging of these differences.

When I sit with my Muslim and Christian interfaith dialogue friends and share books and recipes and favorite music, the depth of the divide we bridge makes the connections that much more powerful and that much more meaningful to me.

**9. It’s vitally important that we take care of ourselves and exercise regularly**

Justice Ginsburg was committed to maintaining her health with regular workouts at the gym. She had a personal trainer, whom she called “the most important person” in her life (after her family), and she was known for hitting the gym regularly in her “Super Diva” sweatshirt — and she was famous for her plank! I defy anyone in their eighties—or even younger—to equal her prowess.

While I prefer swimming and hiking, I agree with Justice Ginsburg about the benefits of regular exercise to keep both the body and the mind in as good shape as possible. I

think that it is a way of “taking God by the hand” and doing what we can to care for the miraculous machine of the body that each of us has received as a gift in life.

Justice Ginsburg endured several years of medical onslaught as she battled a number of different kinds of cancer — but with good body care and with a positive attitude, she kept herself productive against all odds for much longer than expected.

**and 10. Enjoy life and drink the wine**

As journalist Michele Lando wrote in a piece on the web, “In 2015, [Justice Ginsburg] made headlines because she fell asleep during the state of the union address. Admittedly, this is not ideal, and... [we don't] condone drinking and falling asleep at work events; however [Justice Ginsburg]'s response is something we can admire. When questioned about it, she acknowledged that she was tired from drinking wine at dinner beforehand. She stated that '...the dinner was so delicious, it needed wine to accompany it.'"

[The] life lesson? Drink the wine and enjoy yourself. You only live once!"

I am sure we could go on — there could be lots more that I could say about this remarkable, inspiring woman who espoused the finest human and Jewish values.

May she inspire us to live our lives with integrity, passion and a commitment to using all the gifts we have to make the world a better place.

We close with the words of attorney Mirah Curzer, “we owe Justice Ginsburg a great debt, for the great strides she took in advancing progressive causes, and for the bold vision she laid out as a roadmap for the future. May we live to see the future for which she wrote.”

And let us say, Amen.